



## The Gifted Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson was known as the "Sage of Monticello"; he seemed to know something about everything. Once, when he was traveling in Virginia and got into a conversation with a stranger at an inn where he spent the night, he astonished the man with his versatility. The stranger mentioned some mechanical operations he had witnessed recently, and Jefferson's familiarity with them led him to think that Jefferson was an engineer. Then they got to talking about agriculture, and the stranger decided that Jefferson was a farmer. More talk convinced the stranger that he was a lawyer, and then a physician, and when they reached the subject of religion, he concluded that Jefferson was a clergyman, though he wasn't quite sure of what denomination. The next morning he asked the landlord for the name of the remarkable man he met the night before. "What," exclaimed the landlord, "don't you know the Squire?—that was Mr. Jefferson." "Not President Jefferson?" cried the stranger. "Yes," nodded the landlord, "President Jefferson." Years later, when President John F. Kennedy entertained some Nobel prize winners at a White House dinner, he introduced them as "the most extraordinary collection of talents that has ever been gathered at the White House with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone."<sup>1</sup>

Jefferson didn't dine alone much; he was a sociable as well as an erudite fellow. He preferred dining in the President's House with

members of his family, relatives, friends, and guests who shared his passion for the arts and sciences. Historians today insist that Jefferson's skills, particularly as an inventor, have been overrated, but there is no doubt that his endless quest to understand the world about him as best he could enabled him to acquire a tremendous amount of knowledge and skills in an impressive number of fields: chemistry, botany, music, architecture, sculpture, painting, gardening, mathematics, astronomy, and religion. In his own way, Jefferson liked to "twist the tail of the cosmos," as U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., once put it, but he also thought that the increase of knowledge about natural phenomena would produce wiser, better, and happier human beings.

But Jefferson was no couch potato. He was active physically as well as intellectually. He was convinced, in fact, that body and mind were closely related. "If the body be feeble," he warned, "the mind will not be strong." Sometimes he even asserted that a healthy body was more important for a person than a learned mind. "Exercise and recreation," he declared, "are as necessary as reading; I will say rather more necessary, because health is worth more than learning. A strong body makes the mind strong."

In 1993, *Runner's World*, the highly regarded magazine for America's multitudinous runners, singled out the learned Virginian as the "Founding Father of Fitness," and went on to show that the third President of the United States, who did some running in college, was a firm believer in regular exercise for every American. Jefferson recommended walking, the magazine noted, as one of the best ways for a busy person to keep in good shape. "No one knows, till he tries, how easily a habit of walking is acquired," Jefferson told Thomas Mann Randolph, the young man who was to marry his daughter Martha in 1786. "A person who never walked 3 miles will in the course of a month become able to walk 15 or 20 without fatigue. I have known some great walkers and never knew nor heard of one who was not healthy and long-lived." Jefferson also insisted, "Not less than 2 hours a day should be devoted to exercise, and the weather

should be little regarded. I speak from experience, having made this arrangement of my time."<sup>3</sup>

Jefferson was choosy about his exercise. He didn't rate ball games high. "Games played with the ball, and others of that nature," he declared, "are too violent for the body, and stamp no character on the mind."<sup>4</sup> He was friendlier toward hunting, having taken it up early in his life. When he was only ten, his father gave him a gun and ordered him to go into the woods and not return until he'd killed some game. Eager to please his father, he went out and searched far and wide without finding anything to shoot. Finally he came across a wild turkey trapped in a pen, and in no time released it, tied it to a tree, shot it, and carried it home on his shoulder to give to his father. Doubtless he improved as a hunter as he grew older, but as an adult he thought hunting gave only "moderate exercise" for the body, though it "gives boldness, enterprise, and independence to the mind."<sup>5</sup>

Walking, in short, seemed to be Jefferson's favorite exercise, and he insisted that one's heart should be in it. "Never think of taking a book with you," he advised. "The object of walking is to relax the mind. You should therefore not permit yourself even to think while you walk; but divert yourself by the objects surrounding you." And since walking was "the best exercise," people should "habituate themselves to taking long walks." He also advised people to take their outings in the afternoon, "not because it is the best time for exercise, but because it is the best time to spare from your studies."<sup>6</sup>

Jefferson enjoyed horseback riding, but he thought it did far less for the body than walking. "The Europeans value themselves on having subdued the horse to the uses of man," he noted. "But I doubt whether we have not lost more than we have gained by the use of this animal. No one has occasioned so much degeneracy of the human body." But though Jefferson deprecated riding for exercise, he actually loved horses, kept his stable filled with fine steeds, and rode them frequently for recreation, as well as for doing the chores on his plantation at Monticello. He had his accidents, to be sure, once taking a fall while on a fast gallop, breaking his arm and collarbone, and

another time almost drowning when his horse slipped while crossing a river. But most of the time, he was, people said, "a complete master of a horse." When he was President, he rode every day from one to three in the afternoon, and he continued the practice at Monticello after leaving the President's House. "I am too feeble to walk much," he wrote a friend when he was seventy-six, "but ride without fatigue six or eight miles a day and sometimes thirty or forty."<sup>7</sup>

Occasionally Jefferson went fishing. In June 1790, he accompanied President Washington on a three-day fishing trip off Sandy Hook, New Jersey, which attracted the attention of the newspapers, and in the spring of 1791 he and James Madison took a nine-hundred-mile journey in the Northeast, during the course of which they fished in Lake George, in eastern New York. But the lengthy Jefferson-Madison excursion was more than a fishing trip. Jefferson was feeling out of sorts at the time, and he decided to take a vacation from his labors as President Washington's secretary of state in order to "get rid of a headache which is very troublesome, by giving more exercise to the body and less to the mind." Still, he planned to exercise his mind as well, by observing trees and plants along the way at the request of the American Philosophical Society (a scientific organization to which he belonged) and by visiting farmers on Long Island and in other parts of New York to find out how they coped with the depredations of the Hessian fly on their crops. As for Jefferson's friend Madison, then a Virginia congressman, "Health, recreation, and curiosity" were "his objects" in joining Jefferson on the trip.<sup>8</sup>

The trip to the Northeast, which took a little over a month, was great fun for the two Virginians. They traveled by ship, horseback, and carriage, stopping at inns along the way, with Jefferson making detailed records of plants and trees he had never seen before for the APS. But he accomplished much more. He visited factories around Albany that produced salted herring, rum, and nails; discovered a new species, the red squirrel, near Lake Champlain; studied maple sugar production in Vermont; and learned that farmers in the Hudson Val-

trees and designing treescapes almost to the end of his life. "Too old to plant trees for my own gratification," he said, when he was in his eighties, "I shall do it for posterity. Though an old man, I am a young gardener."<sup>11</sup>

Jefferson was an architect as well as a gardener. Learning from books and from buildings he observed while in Europe, he was continually renovating his home, Monticello, located on a small, densely wooded mountain in the Virginian Piedmont. "Architecture is my delight," he said, "and putting up and pulling down one of my favorite amusements." Through it all, he designed his mansion in such a way as to make the slave quarters almost invisible. He was strongly influenced by the Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio, who looked to Roman antiquity for his models. Monticello, as Jefferson designed it, was a modified Palladian villa, and his later architectural masterpieces were in the Palladian style: the Virginia Capitol in Williamsburg; "Poplar Forest," a small retreat house in Bedford County; and the University of Virginia. Professional architects place the buildings for the University of Virginia—his "academical village"—among the greatest of all American architectural achievements.<sup>12</sup>

At Monticello, Jefferson was an inventor as well as a gardener and architect, but his achievements were mainly modest. His most important invention was a "moldboard of least resistance" that increased the effectiveness of the plow and received acclaim in Europe as well as in the United States. One French authority proclaimed Jefferson's plow to be "mathematically exact, and incapable of further improvement," and saw to it that Jefferson received a gold medal for his achievement. Justly proud, Jefferson wrote Robert Fulton that it was "the finest plough which has ever been constructed in America," adding that the plow "is to the farmer what the wand is to the sorcerer." And since the farmer "produces the most essential things of life," the plow was "the most useful of the instruments known to man."<sup>13</sup>

Jefferson's other contrivances—including a dumbwaiter for bringing wine up from the cellar, music and writing stands adjustable in various ways, and a revolving or swivel chair—were minor labor-

ley had developed a new variety of wheat that resisted the Hessian fly attacks. Jefferson was elated by his findings, and his headache was long gone by the time he returned to New York City to resume his work at the State Department. Madison thought his friend was in great shape by the end of the trip.<sup>9</sup>

Before getting back to New York City, then the nation's capital, Jefferson placed a large order for trees and shrubs, including maples, from a nurseryman in Flushing, Long Island, and when they arrived in Monticello he planted sixty maples on his farm, hoping to develop a maple orchard. The orchard failed, to his disappointment, but he had success with many of his other plantings. "No occupation is so delightful to me as the culture of the earth," Jefferson wrote a friend, the artist Charles Willson Peale, "and no culture comparable to that of the garden." The "greatest service which can be rendered any country," he declared, "is to add a useful plant to its culture." When he was in Europe, he made similar journeys for recreation, scientific inquiry, and just plain fun.<sup>10</sup>

At Monticello, Jefferson cultivated some of his gardens for food and others for beauty. "I have often thought," he wrote Peale, "that if heaven had given me choice of my position and calling, it should have been on a rich spot of earth, well watered, and near a good market for the production of the garden." Sometimes considered the first serious gardener in the United States, Jefferson continually exchanged seeds, plants, and botanical information with other gardeners around the country, and took the opportunity when he was abroad to collect plants he thought might be of use to American farmers. He was a "tree-hugger," too, sometimes called the "Father of American Forestry." He hated to see trees wasted, and when he was President, he is said to have exclaimed: "I wish I was a despot that I might save the noble, beautiful trees that are daily falling sacrifice to the cupidity of their owners and the necessity of the poor.... [The] unnecessary falling of a tree, perhaps the growth of centuries, seems to me a crime little short of murder." Jefferson was planting

savers, almost as fun to look at as to utilize. Jefferson was always on the lookout for new labor-saving devices, and he corresponded with, and even sought out, people who he'd learned were tinkering with various gadgets that might be of some use. He kept a set of carpenter's tools and garden instruments in the President's House, "from which he derived much amusement." When he was in France, he insisted on having with him a "box containing small tools for wooden and iron work, for my own amusement." In 1807, Jefferson showed a British diplomat an "odd but useful contrivance" that looked like a turnstile, placed at the foot of his bed, "with 48 projecting hands on which hung his coats and waistcoats and which he could turn round with a long stick, a knickknack that Jefferson was fond of showing with many other mechanical inventions." But Jefferson was interested in large projects, too, like balloon travel, dry docks, submarines, steam power, and odometers, though he never got seriously involved in designing any of them.<sup>14</sup>

In 1797, when Jefferson was elected president of the American Philosophical Society, located in Philadelphia, he called it the "most flattering incident of his life," and in accepting the honor expressed an "ardent desire to see knowledge so disseminated through the mass of mankind, that it may at length reach the extremes of society, beggars and kings." In his proposals for public education and in the curriculum he drew up for the University of Virginia, which he played a major part in founding, he placed special emphasis on the natural sciences. Jefferson didn't believe in "pure" science; he thought that science had intrinsic social significance. Not only did it lead to practical improvements in daily life; he also thought it encouraged diligence, honesty, and zeal for the truth.<sup>15</sup>

While Jefferson liked to tinker with his mechanical instruments and tools, he also spent hours studying and exchanging views with other researchers in a wide variety of disciplines: astronomy, geology, archeology, climatology, mineralogy, botany, optometry, paleontology, chemistry, meteorology, and medicine. In his *Notes on Virginia*, he went to great lengths to disprove the contention of Buffon, a

leading French naturalist, that plants, animals, and even human beings indigenous to the New World were smaller than those in Europe. He took science into his own home, too, arranging the entrance hall in his mansion at Monticello as a kind of museum. On the walls and on tables he displayed peace pipes, wampum belts, moccasins, rattlesnake-skin insignia, and other Indian artifacts; the antlers of an elk; the stuffed head of a bighorn sheep; the upper jaw of a mammoth found in Kentucky; and other fossils. One guest thought there was "no private gentleman in the world in possession of so perfect and complete a scientific, useful, and ornamental collection." After delving into Jefferson's work in science, twentieth-century astronomer Harlow Shapley concluded that the Virginian "had caution and daring inquisitiveness and a willingness to change his mind in the light of new facts or as a result of further thought. What we would now call proper scientific methods appeared to be instinctive with him."<sup>16</sup>

Jefferson's interests were not all scientific; he was attracted to the arts, too, and regarded them, like science, as playing an important part in promoting virtue and happiness among people. He was an amateur when it came to painting and sculpture, in which his tastes were eclectic, but with music he was something of a professional. Music, he said, was "the favorite passion of my soul," and he spent hours practicing the violin as a young man. Apparently a competent performer, he joined two or three other young men in playing for Francis Franquier, the colonial governor, in weekly concerts at the Palace in Williamsburg. He also played for "sympathetic listeners" at Monticello, which included Benjamin Franklin and Francis Hopkinson, one of America's earliest composers. When he was in Paris, Maria Cosway, the Englishwoman with whom Jefferson fell deeply in love, sent him a piece of music that she had composed, and he wrote to John Trumbull: "Kneel to Mrs. Cosway and lay my soul on her lap."<sup>17</sup>

While it has been taken for granted that Jefferson was an able violinist, it is only fair to point out that one of his contemporaries sneered that Patrick Henry was the "worst fiddler" in Virginia, "with

the exception of Thomas Jefferson." But this may have been a political, not a musical, putdown, for Jefferson seems to have played some of the best violin music from Europe—Vivaldi, Corelli, Boccherini, and Handel—with zest and skill. In any case, Jefferson's wife, Martha, adored his violin playing. When he was courting her, he liked to play the violin at her home, as she accompanied him on the harpsichord and they both sang. One day, two of Martha's suitors happened to call on her when Jefferson was there, but when they heard the violin music, they looked resignedly at each other, and one of them exclaimed: "We are wasting our time. We may as well go home." Jefferson married Martha Skelton, a well-to-do widow, in 1772, and soon after he decided to organize a musical group that could play for him and his wife whenever they wanted some music. Not finding the talents he sought in Virginia, he sent to France for a gardener who could play the French horn, a weaver who played the clarinet, a cabinetmaker who had mastered the hautboy (oboe), and a stonemason who could handle the bassoon. He didn't get quite what he wanted, but he did have a small ensemble for a time among his household workers, and he occasionally joined them in playing.<sup>18</sup>

When Jefferson became President in 1801, he took his preference for "Republican simplicity" with him and abolished the weekly levees and formal drawing rooms, replaced formal bows with handshakes, opened the President's House to visitors of all classes every morning, and, when asking guests to dinner at four at the executive mansion, substituted "Thomas Jefferson invites" for "The President of the United States" on the invitation cards. He dressed simply and plainly, particularly in the morning, even when welcoming foreign diplomats who came to pay formal calls on him and were splendidly attired. Some diplomats were offended, but Andrew Merry, the Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of His Britannic Majesty, was infuriated. He complained that Jefferson met him in his slippers and that the informal etiquette (which he called "pell-mell"), recognizing no status distinctions, at the first presidential dinner for Merry was a deliberate insult to him and his wife.<sup>19</sup>

But most people found Jefferson's dinners enormously satisfying. Though Jefferson was mostly a vegetarian and a moderate wine drinker, his dinners, often featuring French cuisine, were elegant. One guest reported that "never before had such dinners been given in the President's house, nor such a variety of the finest and costly wines." The "absence of splendour, ornament and profusion," he added, "was more than compensated [for] by the neatness, order and elegant sufficiency that pervaded the whole establishment." Jefferson not only entertained every day (usually having fourteen guests), but he also took care that all the guests felt comfortable and at home in the President's House. "I dined a large company once or twice a week," former President John Adams observed, "and Jefferson dined a dozen every day." In fact, Adams added, "I held levees once a week, and Jefferson's whole eight years was a levee." Jefferson claimed he enjoyed the family get-togethers the most and held the dutiful dinners for members of Congress and foreign diplomats without much enjoyment. His fun came in picking other kinds of guests: distinguished travelers, scientists, writers, explorers, and just plain citizens. Once he invited his butcher to dinner. When the man learned that one of Jefferson's guests was ill and that meant an extra place at the President's House, he decided to bring his own son with him. Jefferson was unfazed; he introduced both of them to his other guests and kept an eye on them during the dinner to be sure that they were having a good time.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to wining and dining his guests, Jefferson liked to show them his library, both at the President's House and at Monticello. He regretted not having time as President to do much reading, but he continued to add books to his collection. "I cannot live without books," he confessed. By 1815, when he sold his books to Congress (to pay some debts) as the nucleus of a congressional library, he had accumulated more than seven thousand volumes. Jefferson's enemies were critical of the transaction, insisting there were subversive books in the collection. "It might be inferred," growled Cyrus King, a die-hard Federalist, "from the character of the man who collected it, and France, where the collection was made, that the library contained irreligious

and immoral books, works of the French philosopher who caused and influenced the volcano of the French Revolution. The bill would put \$23,900 into Jefferson's pocket for about 6,000 books, good, bad, and indifferent, old, new, and worthless, in languages many can not read, and most ought not [to]. As for Jefferson, after turning his collection over to the Library of Congress, he resumed collecting books.<sup>21</sup>


Jefferson's books included the ancient classics, of course, as well as books on scientific, legal, historical, political, religious, and philosophical subjects and on the fine arts. Jefferson took a practical approach to his library. Books, he thought, were tools to help people master serious disciplines. "Nothing of amusement," he said solemnly, "should lumber a public library." He did, though, read fiction, as well as poetry, for pleasure, and he regarded Shakespeare as indispensable for anyone "who wishes to learn the full power of the English language." For Jefferson, reading and writing were closely allied. In giving advice to a young friend on how to read, he urged him to criticize "the style of any book whatsoever, committing the criticism to writing. Translate into the different styles, to wit, the elevated, the middling, and the familiar. . . . Undertake at first short compositions . . . paying great attention to the elegance and correctness of your language."<sup>22</sup>

Jefferson stressed "elegance and correctness" in his own writing. It was his "peculiar felicity of expression," John Adams said, that led him to be chosen to write the first draft of the Declaration of Independence. Adams, who entered into an extensive correspondence with Jefferson later in life, also praised Jefferson's letters. He thought they ought to be published, for, he said, "they will exhibit a Mass of Taste, Sense, Literature and Science, presented in a sweet simplicity and a neat elegance of Style, which will be read with delight in a future age." Jefferson once said that "an hour of conversation would be worth a volume of letters," but in this instance he was egregiously mistaken, for the Adams-Jefferson letters, available since the 1950s in a handsome edition, are one of the great pieces of writing that appeared in the early years of the American republic.<sup>23</sup>

On June 24, 1826, Jefferson wrote his last letter. It was a reply to a request by Roger C. Weightman to attend an Independence Day celebration in Washington planned for the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Regretting his inability to be present because of illness, Jefferson went on to make his final pronouncement on the issues and values that had concerned him for most of his life. "All eyes are opened or opening to the rights of man," he told Weightman. "The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few bootied and spurred ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God." Less than two weeks later, on July 4, he was dead. John Adams had died a little earlier that day.<sup>24</sup>

## The Gifted Thomas Jefferson

1. Use the dictionary to define the word *sage*.
2. Why was Jefferson known as the “sage of Monticello?”
3. What was Jefferson’s opinion of exercise?
4. To Jefferson, were exercise and inelegance related?
5. What did Jefferson think was the best for of exercise?
6. What were some of the things that Jefferson did on his “vacation” to the northeast?
7. A lover of nature, to Jefferson, the unnecessary cutting down of trees was a crime little short of \_\_\_\_\_.




8. An accomplished architect, what distinguished American university did Jefferson design?

9. What did Jefferson say was “the favorite passion of my soul?”

10. Describe Jefferson’s eating habits.

11. What did Jefferson say he could not live without?



12. Who did Jefferson sell his private library to?

13. Who died on the same day as Thomas Jefferson?